

Chapter 13

“I really don’t like that they didn’t include Nana,” grumbled Tessandra.

The girls were walking back to the castle, a couple of hours later. Cessilia was still holding the heavy almanac of the Hashat Family, but she had already discussed plenty about plants and medicine with Ishira. As it turned out, the young women had a common passion for the study of plants and medicine, but also the same age and a real affinity. The only issue was that Ishira was clearly tied to her family and tribe, which had yet to make up their mind about Cessilia. She had kept her distance throughout and spoke politely to the Princess rather than trying to get familiar. Hence, the invitation to a dinner that same evening was formally addressed to Cessilia, and only allowed her to come with Tessandra. Although she had tried to be subtle, it was clear Ishira didn’t include Naptunie in this.

“It’s alright,” said Nana. “It can’t be helped, this is serious business between the clans. I also think it is better I don’t come, I don’t like being involved in these kinds of things too much, really.”

“The Hashat Family doesn’t seem as bad as the others, at least,” sighed Tessandra, “and this way, perhaps we will get to know more about our mothers...”

“Your mothers?” Nana repeated, curious. “What do you mean?”

“My m-mother and T-Tessandra’s were b-born into a t-tribe that d-disappeared long ago,” explained Cessilia. “It was c-called the Rain T-Tribe, and they mostly had white-skinned p-people. B-but their village was raided, p-people were k-killed or sold long b-before we were b-born, so only a few ind-dividuals remain...”

“The Eastern Kingdom was the main enemy,” sighed Tessandra, “but the truth is, the survivors were sold in both the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Kingdom... which is why Cessi and I were curious about people with lighter skin tones, like in that Hashat Family. We are probably related somehow...”

“Oh... I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” muttered Nana, lowering her head.

They were just entering the castle, but Cessilia shook her head.

“You c-couldn’t have known, Nana. It-t all happened long ago.”

“And as it turns out, no one likes to talk about slaves,” scoffed Tessandra.

After that, Naptunie didn’t dare bring up the subject anymore, and all three girls went into the castle. To Cessilia’s surprise, guards had been posted in front of her room, although they didn’t move a muscle upon seeing the trio. Tessandra frowned, but the girls walked into the bedroom in silence, only to find the triplets there. The three of them got down on their knees as soon as they saw Cessilia.

“Greetings, Princess,” said the oldest. “Our apologies for failing to protect the lady’s belongings. This won’t happen anymore.”

“I d-don’t t-trust you,” Cessilia retorted coldly.

“We will do our very best to earn the Princess’ trust again,” insisted the servants, lowering their heads even more.

Cessilia glared their way once more and then turned around to ignore the three of them. Looking around her room, she noticed the new pile of clothing they were busy putting into the wardrobe just a second ago, and the several boxes scattered on the floor too.

“What’s this?” asked Tessa.

“His Majesty offers these gifts to the Princess. Since the Princess’ belongings were... damaged, the King said it was his responsibility to replace them.”

“This wasn’t the King’s doing,” retorted Tessa. “The Yekara Clan almost openly admitted to it!”

“...His Majesty said he will make sure compensation will be received from the culprits in due time.”

“What a-about Lady V-Vena’s murder?” Cessilia asked.

“His Majesty has his suspicions, but we have yet to find the murderer. The investigation is still ongoing, and more people are still being interrogated. He asks for the Princess to be very careful until the real culprits are caught.”

“That’s easy for him to say,” scoffed Tessandra. “There hasn’t been a day without a burglary, a murder, or an ambush since we came here. Just wait until I get my hands on that damn vermin... I need something to release my nerves on.”

“...You th-three can leave,” said Cessilia. “I need t-to change.”

“We can assist—”

“G-get out.”

The triplets bowed, and quickly left, most likely to guard the room. Tessa pinched her lips. She wasn’t fond of the triplets, either, but she was a bit surprised by Cessilia’s cold attitude toward them. She crossed her arms and approached her cousin, who was still rummaging through the dresses.

“What is it, Cessi? We already established those three were spying on us for the King... is there something else?”

“They are t-trained for fighting,” said Cessilia, “b-but they aren’t g-good servants at all. They d-didn’t guard our room and b-burglars came in. They d-didn’t offer us anything to d-drink although we just c-came back and it’s hot outside, and the p-plants haven’t b-been watered either.”

Tessandra frowned and turned to the plants. Only her cousin would have noticed the leaves of the only two small plants by the balcony, slightly less green than when they had arrived. She looked around and realized Cessilia was telling the truth. It was all small details, but for someone who had lived in a palace, it was obvious. The bedsheets had small wrinkles, and there was a thin layer of dust on the columns of the room.

“Fine, perhaps they are bodyguards that have been trained to be servants, but—”

“I d-don’t think they are b-bodyguards, either. Somebody was f-following me yesterday when I was at the m-market with Lady B-Bastat.”

“Now that you mention it... I had a feeling we were being followed when we were with Sabael, but the place was so crowded, I couldn’t find who it was.”

“Ashen also knew K-Krai had taken us out,” Cessilia nodded. “D-do you remember how long it t-took us to get from the c-castle to the Outer G-Gates?”

“He arrived to save you almost right after those guys had begun chasing us... Even with a very fast horse, it should have taken longer than that. ...Do you think the triplets were watching us and tipped him off? That we had left?”

“I’m n-not sure,” sighed Cessilia, “...b-but I don’t t-trust them.”

“Well, I don’t either, but it’s rare to see you so... careful, Cessi,” said Tessandra, sitting down on the bed.

“It’s l-like you said. There was a m-murder already... We need to b-be more c-careful.”

Tessa and Nana exchanged a look. Naptunie nodded, agreeing with Cessilia. The fact that a girl from one of the most powerful clans had been murdered inside the castle itself was troubling enough already, but after the burglary and the attack, they just couldn’t act as if this was simply an isolated threat anymore. They were all impacted by the clans trying to push their candidates up while getting rid of others.

While rummaging through the dresses, Cessi couldn’t help but think she had made a wise decision, keeping her relationship with the King a secret for now...

“Nana, when will th-the next b-banquet be?”

“Oh my god, I completely forgot to tell you!” exclaimed the young woman, jumping on her feet. “I heard from my uncle that it was decided at the morning council that the next banquet will be tomorrow! Apparently, since the candidates are in danger, they all want to rush the competition. A lot of the Lords also asked to have bodyguards in the castle to protect their candidates, but His Majesty didn’t attend that council, and they just kept fighting about it, so it was dismissed for now...”

“No wonder,” scoffed Tessandra. “The King won’t accept them bringing more of their own men into the castle when they are all already busy trying to murder each other... I wonder who made him late, hm, Cessi?”

Her cousin blushed, tightening her grip on the dress she was holding. Next to them, Naptunie blushed too, and went to help Cessilia sort the dresses, clearly needing to do something with her hands.

“The Lords agreed to have the next banquet held in the arena, apparently.”

“An arena?” Tessandra repeated. “...Is that a joke?”

“No... Apparently, several of the candidates have asked to have more space for their next demonstrations, so enough of them agreed to have it held in the arena...”

“N-Nana, where is th-the arena?”

“Oh, it’s below the ground, under the castle! It was built to look like an arena, with stairs and everything, but it’s not that big... It was originally a vacant cave in the castle’s foundations, but the previous King had decided to use it for the soldiers to train because he had too many of them. Sadly, it became more of an execution room than anything. I have never seen it myself, I heard it was closed for years.”

Tessandra smirked.

“Of course... They don’t need more space, they need an underground location.”

“Somewhere a d-dragon can’t reach,” muttered Cessilia.

Nana’s jaw dropped.

“I didn’t even think of that! Do you think they chose that location because Sir Dragon scared them?!”

“Or because he won’t be able to defend Cessi this way...”

“What d-do you think, Nana, c-can a dragon g-get there?”

Nana pouted, a bit unsure.

“I’ve never gone to that place myself... It’s probably closed to the public too if they are to be ready tomorrow. I could ask the people working here for information, though! I get along with some of the girls in the kitchen, and—”

“Let me guess, one of them is your cousin?” chuckled Tessandra.

“H-h-how did you know...?”

“I think I’m starting to understand a thing or two about your family, Nana. Alright, we can try and ask about it, then. I like to know the grounds before a battle... and see if it’s really as protected as they said.”

“We won’t need t-to use K-Krai...” Cessilia protested.

“The last time we couldn’t call out the big guy, we ended up running with three dozen assassins behind us, Cessilia. I will go check with Nana, just to see what it’s like, alright?”

Cessilia protested, but the two women quickly headed out, leaving her there with her dresses. Cessilia let out a long sigh. She didn’t have any idea yet of what she would do at the next banquet, especially in a new location. She would have to figure something out by tomorrow, which worried her a little. After she had tried to act tough in front of Ashen, she didn’t want to act disappointing in front of all the Lords, candidates, and him... She had ruled out showing more of her dragon-related abilities. It was enough that she had made a statement about it. If she relied any more on this, it would be the same as crushing her way to the top, the last thing she wanted. For now, Cessilia was interested in winning, in a fair way.

She already had the Sehsan, Dorosef, and Hashat as her allies, or at least, not her enemies. The Pangoja and Yekara Clans were the main source of

trouble, but from what she had seen, this wasn't just about her; those two clans would have also gladly gotten rid of the King and their other rivals if they could... From their candidates' arrogance, Cessilia could predict those two clans wouldn't ally themselves with another. Only the Nahaf and Yonchaa she had yet to meet, but they were at the bottom of her priorities for now. She was more interested in the mysterious Cheshi Clan... If they were opposing the King for the murder of the Kunu Tribe they weren't even allied with, why were they still alive? It was like those people were in a cold war with the White King, biding their time. Perhaps they were even watching this competition from afar?

At least, Cessilia could feel a bit better, now that she was more confident Ashen's heart was hers. The dresses in front of her were all absolutely gorgeous... Some even had threads of gold, complex embroideries, and gorgeous silk materials she hadn't seen in the market. Naptunie seemed a bit dazzled when she had seen them too; Cessilia would ask her later if she knew about these materials. In the meantime, she felt a bit happy and took her time picking the ones she liked the most, until a little knock was heard on the door.

Cessilia frowned, wondering who would knock without announcing themselves, aside from Tessandra who would have barged in...

"...Who is it?"

The door slowly opened, and Jisel entered, a smile on her lips. Cessilia's heart dropped. Something about that woman made her uneasy. The way her smile didn't go all the way up to her eyes, or how she wriggled her body around like a snake with a steel spine. Cessilia began glaring at her without even thinking, while Jisel casually made her way into the room.

"Looks like I'm bothering the Princess, again," said Jisel with her honeyed voice. "...Did you enjoy your presents?"

Cessilia's eyes quickly went to the pile of dresses she was admiring just before. How did Jisel know about the presents sent by Ashen already? If he had just sent them that morning... That woman kept walking around the room as if she was visiting it for the first time. She casually put her

fingers on the nacre of the column, reminding Cessilia how she had done the very same thing just a few days prior...

“You really don’t like me, do you, Princess?”

Cessilia didn’t answer. The answer was obvious... She was trying to understand why that woman had come. She didn’t believe it was a coincidence for her to appear while Tessandra was away...

“That’s fine,” said Jisel. “You and I are more alike than we would probably like to admit... Dragon daughters are so easily made jealous, and rather possessive. Aren’t we?”

Cessilia’s heart froze.

“You’re no d-dragon daughter,” she hissed back.

“How would you know?” scoffed Jisel. “We grew up in different countries, yet don’t we look alike?”

Jisel turned around. Cessilia realized they were about the same height, and had a similar physique, although Jisel’s dress was so flowy, she hid her curves. Her hair was slightly curly too, like Cessilia’s, and her red hair was a shade not too far away from hers. But the most similar thing between them was their skin tone. Even Cessilia’s siblings all had different skin tones, varying in shades closer to either her mother’s or her father’s. But for Cessilia, who’d never seen anyone out of her family look like them, seeing someone else with a skin color so close to hers was disturbing. Jisel tilted her head.

“You’re having dinner with the Hashat Family leader tonight, aren’t you?”

“How d-did you know?”

Jisel chuckled.

“The walls have ears here, Princess. There’s little you can conceal from others, no matter how hard you try. Everyone talks... Everyone listens too. I am good at getting useful information and using it well. ...You might want to remember that.”

“Are you th-threatening me?”

“No, I’m letting you know I can help. Again.”

“B-but we hate each other.”

Jisel chuckled and began slowly stepping toward her.

“Hate and anger are emotions that only serve men, Princess. I can’t be bothered to hate you. It wouldn’t help me, would it? I can’t hate my owner’s lover. Who would you think he’d kick out first? His loyal dog or his beloved Princess?”

Cessilia was shocked. Jisel was comparing herself to... a dog? Since the beginning, she had felt something was off about that woman. While her speech felt real, it also sounded like... someone broken inside. Jisel didn’t have the eyes of a playful, young woman, she had the darkness of someone who had seen a lot already. She reminded Cessilia of her aunt, or her grandmother, who could smile while coldly killing someone...

“D-don’t come near me,” Cessilia suddenly blurted out, seeing Jisel so close.

“You’re not scared of me,” said Jisel, ignoring her words. “You’re scared because we’re too similar, aren’t we? If we had been born in each other’s family...? Who do you think would be backing off now?”

Cessilia only now realized she had taken a step back. She glared at Jisel, but the woman chuckled, and turned around, putting her hands together behind her back while walking away.

“Ha... If I were you, I’d pick the green dress to visit the Hashat people. Just a tip... from a non-friend.”

“Why are you d-doing this? P-provoking me? What d-do you have to gain?!”

“Because it’s a bit fun... and also, because we need each other.”

“I d-don’t need you.”

“Oh, but you do. Aren’t you curious to know who commanded Vena’s death, and the attack at the Outer Wall?”

Cessilia's expression fell.

"How d-did you..."

"I'm telling you, Princess. I've lived in this Kingdom for a long time. I know how to get information. Finding who bribed the guards is almost too easy for me... as well as getting rid of them."

Jisel chuckled, and leaning her back against the door, she smiled at Cessilia once again.

"How about you try, Princess? Ask the Hashat Leader about me tonight. Ask those people my story... and your mother's family, of course. Isn't that what you want to find out? You'll see and hear interesting things, Princess... and you can make up your own mind later. And if you still think we shouldn't be allies after tonight... well, every woman for herself then."

She silently left without adding a word, leaving Cessilia to stand there, frustrated and furious.

What was that woman's real aim? From the beginning, Cessilia didn't believe her words. As Tessandra had said, she was a snake in a nest of rats. Why would she help her rival? She had called Ashen her owner... Did she really have no connection to the Hashat Family, or any other, then? If so, why would the leader know her story...? Cessilia was feeling so uneasy about everything, she barely heard Tessandra and Nana coming back.

"Cessi, we tried but the place is closed off to anyone but the Royal Servants, since they are preparing the banquet, but... Hey, what is it?"

"Lady Cessilia, you're pale," noted Naptunie, walking up to her, carrying a large volume in her arms.

"N-no, I'm... It's n-nothing," muttered Cessilia.

Her cousin didn't seem to believe her, frowning, but Cessilia averted her gaze by walking away from them. A bit mindlessly, she picked up the dresses and shoved them in the wardrobe, only keeping a dark blue one out. Her pride kept her from following that woman's advice, although she doubted Jisel would have lied about such a trivial thing. Cessilia was only

picking this blue dress out of anger at her rival. Plus, it wasn't like this dress wasn't fitting, just that it wasn't green. The Princess found it prettier and tried to convince herself this was a good enough reason to pick it.

She didn't feel like sharing about Jisel's visit just yet, so she stayed silent despite her attitude probably betraying her. No doubt Tessandra could tell something was wrong, but the Princess hoped her cousin would wait a bit before interrogating her further.

"Oh... Uh, my cousin couldn't help, but there is this book about the castle and the geographical information of the territory," said Naptunie, a bit unsure about the atmosphere. "It's a bit of an older edition, but it should still be pretty accurate! I had read it once when I was younger, but I couldn't understand everything back then... A lot of it is archeology and geology."

"Th-thank you, Nana." Cessilia smiled, happy to have her mind distracted. "That might b-be exactly what I n-need."

"...Do you already have an idea what you're going to do, Lady Cessilia?" Naptunie raised her eyebrows, curious.

"N-not yet," she admitted.

She laid the dress out in front of her, checking that the size would be right and if she needed any alterations, and then went to the small bathroom to change, although she could still hear the other two. Cessilia found the dress looked even prettier once she had it on, the overall look pleasing her. It was a deep blue with a braided leather belt, off-the-shoulder but with long sleeves, and it emphasized the curves of her body well, with a long, straight skirt. The fact that Ashen had been the one to gift her this dress calmed her heart a little. It really was pretty, yet not too showy; just her type. She walked back into the room, looking through the little nacre jewelry she had bought with Nana for something to match her dress.

"Surviving would be a good start," sighed Tessa, lying on the couch. "This new banquet smells like a trap from a mile away! An underground place, of all things... "

Cessilia wouldn't argue that the location had clearly been chosen to avoid another appearance from Krai. However, she didn't want to use her father's dragon a second time. She would have to do things in a more subtle way from now on. Approaching it head-on wasn't her thing in the first place, but at the first banquet, she needed to make a clear statement so people would leave them alone, and not risk putting Nana in danger again. Luckily, Vena's murder had calmed everyone down... although the Yekara Clan was still the most problematic. They clearly didn't fear much about getting caught for murdering someone in the King's residence. Not only that, but corruption was blatantly rampant among the officials, and this wasn't something she could get rid of with fear alone.

While she got ready, Naptunie opened her large book and read the part that referred to the cave, happy to dive into some research for Cessilia. The young woman's eyes finished reading the four pages in less than a couple of minutes to sum it up.

"This cave is called the Thousand Years Cave, and is believed to be at least as old as the Capital's island itself," she said. "Made of limestone, it was left behind when the sea levels went lower under the castle over the years. It's basically a sea cave, and there is still some salty water left behind, a small, shallow lake in the center of the cave. There is apparently even an opening to the sea remaining, but it's hidden in the deepest part of the lake, the only part of it that is actually deep. The tunnel connecting to the sea should be there, but it is completely submerged, so although there are still some small fish, not even a really good human swimmer can get out this way. According to this book, about a third of the bottom of the cave is an underground lake, so I think the arena will most likely be built around it."

"Trying to trap us with an underground setting and water?" Tessandra snickered.

"Now there is an entrance from within the castle," explained Nana. "The main entrance, at least, but there might be a couple of side ones or even secret doors to other parts of the castle. Previous kings apparently had planned to try and use the cave as a refuge for people if needed, but they

never found a way to actually create another opening to the outside, as the rock wall is too thick to build anything and the underwater passage is unusable. So it was used for the storage of goods, but then the wars happened and people ransacked it, so it was closed and vacant for a while. Then, as I said, the previous King turned it into a training and execution ground...”

“Are th-there many c-caves around?” asked Cessilia.

“I think they are quite common,” nodded Nana. “From what I have seen in geography and history books, the sea used to be much higher a few centuries back, so I guess there could be more secret underwater caves we don’t know of! I only know a couple that are somewhat famous in the islands, and reachable by boat. There might be more farther away, though, the most recent maps are showing more and more islands as we discover them. According to legends, pirates used natural caves as their lair, because their location was easy to hide and hard to approach... Pirate stories are quite popular too!”

Naptunie suddenly realized she may have talked a bit too much, and closed her mouth with a little nervous chuckle, although neither of the cousins minded.

“That’s our favorite bookworm for you. ...What do you think, Cessi?” asked Tessandra.

The Princess, who was currently arranging her hair into a high ponytail and combing her long curls, tilted her head.

“It sounds like we might b-be lucky,” she said. “Our d-dragon might not be fond of caves, but we are g-good swimmers. We c-can always f-find a way.”

“No, no, no!” exclaimed Nana. “You don’t understand, this isn’t just a long swim, it’s an impossible, very long swim, and underwater! According to the data here, they estimated it would take at least ten or fifteen minutes for someone to swim out to the other side! And it’s just an estimation, no human has ever done it! No one can hold their breath for that long... Plus,

it will mostly be in the dark, so the risk of hitting a rock or something is high! This is really too scary!”

The two cousins exchanged a glance.

“...Which side of the ocean does that lead to? Just in case,” asked Tessandra, sitting up.

“Uh... let’s see... To the east. There’s a little beach with a small cave on the other side of the castle’s rock that is believed to be the other side of that underwater tunnel, on the sea level...”

“Can that beach be accessed any other way?”

“Only with a boat, I think, but not many people should even know of it. It’s too far below the castle’s level to jump from above, and it’s too far from the other sides of the castle’s island to swim to it either. It’s visible if you stand at the edge of the Fish Market though. But it’s not recorded on any map or book that I know of. I heard my cousins used to go to that beach to play, but there isn’t much to do there, and it’s hard to maneuver a boat...”

“How about a dragon landing there?”

“Uh... If it’s Sir Dragon, I think he could...”

Naptunie looked completely lost between the two women’s cunning expressions, Tessandra even looking a bit excited. The only thing she understood was that they were evidently planning to use the waterway and beach as an escape route, but she had no idea how in the world they would accomplish such a miracle. Eventually, she sighed and closed the book, not willing to ask more. At times, she had a hard time understanding how the two ladies thought, but she did trust them. She was starting to understand how ordinary she was compared to these two and their family’s strange abilities...

“We should p-probably get g-going now,” said Cessilia, standing up, all ready.

“Lady Cessilia, you’re stunning! This dress really suits you... Are you not going to change, Lady Tessa?” asked Naptunie.

Tessandra grimaced. She had clearly made no effort to change her clothes and didn’t want to move from the couch either. Still, she slowly sat up.

“I told you it’s fine to just call me Tessa. ...And I’m only going as a bodyguard. I’m no princess like Cessi. It’s also pretty clear they are only interested in her. I only regret that you can’t come too, Nana.”

“It’s alright! I will stay with my uncle and read this book! Now that I’ve read a few lines, I feel like re-reading it... Maybe I will find something useful for the banquet! Something that doesn’t include a dark and scary underwater tunnel... I should probably prepare some sort of performance too, although I’m not interested.”

“You’ll d-do great.” Cessilia smiled. “J-just make sure you d-don’t stay around my b-bedroom. There might b-be another attack...”

Naptunie looked around the room, as if she suddenly became cautious of it.

“...I understand. I’ll be careful then!”

“I want to grab some dinner before we go, will you come with me, Nana?”

“Aren’t we invited t-to dinner already?” said Cessilia, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, and we don’t know how long it will take, if it will be bad, or worse...poisoned. I would rather have a snack before to be sure not to starve later. Let’s just make a detour on the way out.”

Cessilia chuckled, but she suspected Tessandra’s sudden need for a snack had to do with the fact that the kitchens were about halfway to Counselor Yamino’s office. She probably wanted to accompany Naptunie and make sure nothing happened to her before she got safely to her uncle. The young Dorosef girl had no idea, either, and was only excited to grab a little treat with Tessandra.

The three girls left the room, and this time, Cessilia took a good look around before closing the door behind her. She was suspicious of how

easy it had been for intruders to get in, and even Jisel had come in without the guards notifying her. Either the King's mistress had caused a distraction to be able to sneak past them, or those people were more easily bribed than Ashen thought. Maybe because of that, she felt particularly on edge and cautious of her surroundings while the three girls moved around the castle. She looked out for any shadow at a corner, glanced at the guards to try and feel if there was any ill intent toward their trio, and kept close to Tessa and Nana.

Because of that, she didn't miss the steps following them shortly after. However, she couldn't feel any maliciousness, and whoever was following them was careful not to approach either.

"T-Tessa, t-take Nana to Uncle Yamino's office, p-please."

"...What about you?" asked her cousin, frowning.

"I th-think I forgot something," she lied. "D-don't worry, I'll meet you at th-the entrance!"

"...Alright."

Tessandra nodded, and while she and Nana walked away, Cessilia took a different corridor. She now knew the castle well enough to find her way to the entrance, and as soon as she found an isolated enough area with a wide window, she turned around, glaring at the shadow.

She was about to ask whoever followed her to reveal their presence, but they stepped forward before she opened her mouth. Cessi calmed down as she recognized the large figure that came up to her.

"Ash—!"

His lips were on hers before she could even finish, claiming a passionate kiss. Cessilia blushed helplessly, surprised by his fervor. His overwhelming stature was pushing her against the wall, wrapping his arms around her body and slightly lifting her off her feet. Cessilia grabbed his large shoulders by reflex, answering his kiss with a smile, relieved and happy to see him again.

When he stopped, a bit out of breath, she chuckled and caressed his cheek. “D-did you miss me?” she whispered.

Their faces were so close, she could see every detail of his skin, of his irises, and the small scars on his messily shaved cheeks and chin.

“...Like crazy,” he admitted in a breath. “I was dying to see you again after this morning... I couldn’t focus on anything else.”

Cessilia chuckled, and they exchanged a gentler, slower kiss. They were almost hidden in a narrow and deserted corridor with Ashen’s cloak covering them. His dark eyes looked almost in a daze, staring at her as if he was worried he’d forget her face if he looked away for even a second. His large hand was holding on to her waist, his thumb slowly rubbing, spreading his warmth everywhere he touched, and more importantly, keeping their bodies close.

“...You look beautiful,” he said, glancing from her high ponytail to her dress.

He kissed her shoulder, before noticing the simple necklace of nacre around her neck.

“Didn’t you like what I sent?”

“I like th-this too.” Cessilia smiled. “I b-bought it with Nana at the market... P-plus, your mistress c-came to visit b-before I could ch-check it...”

“Jisel?” His eyes darkened. “What the fuck did she want with you?”

“How c-could she c-come into my room?” Cessilia ignored his question.

Ashen stepped back, looking angry.

“I gave orders for her to not approach you,” he said.

“She d-did. I d-don’t know who you ordered, Ashen, b-but it’s not working.”

The King's expression got even darker, and Cessilia felt the same. This meant he had even less authority than he thought, or the castle was full of corrupt guards.

"...I'll talk to her," he hissed.

Cessilia felt a bit upset that he wouldn't already have. Had he avoided his mistress purposely, or simply forgotten to tell her to stay away? Either way, she wasn't very satisfied with this. She looked away, a bit sullen, but Ashen gently caressed her cheek.

"...I'm sorry, Cessilia. I swear it won't happen again."

"Next t-time, I won't be as p-polite," she muttered.

He chuckled.

"You don't have to be."

He sighed, and hoping to lighten her mood a bit, leaned forward to kiss her temple this time. His stubble tickled her a bit causing Cessilia to smile. Turning back toward him, she found Ashen was frowning again.

"...W-what is it?"

"Nothing."

"D-don't tell me it's nothing."

"Sorry. It's... things are a bit tense. And with that thing with the guards... I'm worried someone is going to attack you again."

"I c-can take c-care of myself, Ashen."

He smirked, not as a means to mock her, but because he knew that to be the truth. His hands went down around her, caressing her waist and back, sending excited shivers down her spine.

"...How are your injuries?" he asked.

"They're all healed now."

Ashen smiled, and leaned forward, his lips dangerously close. She could feel his breathing, gentle against her skin, and the thumping of his heart.

“...Dine with me tonight. We can have a date... and then...”

“We c-can’t,” Cessilia suddenly put her hands on his torso, pushing him away.

“What?” he exclaimed, upset. “Why not? ...Are you still upset with me?”

Cessilia had to bite her lip not to smile. He looked like a big dog, sorry it had offended its owner. She could almost see the white ears popping out of his hair... She shook her head slowly and caressed his hair like she would have petted an obedient dog.

“No,” she chuckled, “b-but I am invited t-to a dinner with the Hashat Family Leader.”

“...The Hashat Family?” Ashen frowned. “Tonight? ...I don’t like this.”

“It sounds like you d-don’t like me t-to be with anyone else, Ashen...”

“That’s true,” he scoffed. “Plus, their heir is known to be handsome, or so they say...”

“Who says th-that?”

Ashen’s expression fell, and he turned to Cessilia.

“I haven’t heard it from women!” he exclaimed. “Well, maybe... I mean, I’ve seen him, I guess he’s... fine.”

Cessilia chuckled and kissed his cheek.

“I like you jealous. It’s your t-turn.”

“Cessi...”

“I’m about t-to go, anyway. T-Tessa is coming t-too.”

He sighed, pouting a bit, but didn’t insist anymore. Ashen’s eyes went to the end of the corridor, verifying that no one was spying on them. After a while, he turned back to her, resolute.

“...I’ll come and get you,” he whispered.

“But...”

“I’ll wait until you’re done there, and then we can have our date... I really want to show you my city. That was one regret I had when we met in the Empire... I never got to show you anything about where I came from. Let me show you tonight.”

He grabbed her hands in his, holding them gently. Cessilia nodded, and got on her toes to give him another quick kiss.

“...Alright,” she muttered, “I’ll see you later t-tonight, then.”

To her surprise, Ashen answered with another sudden, more passionate kiss. Unlike her chaste kiss, his was passionate, with his tongue and all his desire in it, making her legs a bit weak and sending blood rushing to her cheeks. When they separated, Cessilia was out of breath and red.

“See you later, my love.”